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# BREAKING BAD

By Darek Kuźma

**T**alented cinematographer Evelin Van Rei, this recipient of the 2022 Angénieux Special Encouragement Award as a promising new talent in the field of cinematography, got her teeth into the juicy Apple TV+ dark comedy show *Bad Sisters*.

Van Rei, the Dutch DP and photographer, who resides in the UK, has been rising steadily through the ranks of scripted UK TV, as well as shooting shorts for European indie directors, and progressing to an Apple TV+ series represented a fantastic opportunity. She was recommended for the show by *Bad Sisters*' lead DP Nicole Hirsch Whitaker to take over her duties for the last few weeks of episodes 1-3 with lead director Dearbhla Walsh. Then, series producer Johann Knobel invited Van Rei back to shoot episodes 4-6 with director Josephine Bornebusch. Even though the cinematographer's personal taste for more visceral imagery did not necessarily align with the show's stylised look, she went out of her way to fulfil the visual requirements of creating a story tailored to a mainstream audience.

This does not mean she did not try to push the envelope just a little bit.

"I always seek to imprint my signature on the imagery I create," says Van Rei. "Coming onto a show at a later stage meant that most things had already been established, so it was about the little victories and intricacies which I could influence, evolve or expand upon," she explains.

"I wanted to scale-back the lighting, as I love the feeling of light being emotive, understated and authentic. I don't like things over-lit, or with too much fill and 'beautified', and wanted it to be rooted in European naturalism. I was keen on pushing for more unconventional framing, more head room and, overall, more artistic and unusual angles that would visualise the interesting world of *Bad Sisters*' heroines."

The show's inherent quirkiness definitely helped. The story is set in Ireland and revolves around five Garvey sisters, one of whom is married to a sociopath who riles everyone up with acts of vicious mischief. Or rather was married, as John Paul, JP for short, died before *Bad Sisters* starts. In fact, the storyline begins just before his wake, with JP's mindless body having a boner, thus establishing the show's peculiar tone. It turns out that his sisters-in-law had all reasons to help the bastard kick the bucket – but did they? As we get to know more with successive flashbacks, the present sees the sisters examined by two Claffin brothers, desperate not to pay up JP's

insurance policy.

One Van Rei's precious little victories came during a night scene in which one Garvey sister confronts one of the Claffins in their office and ends up... kissing him. The words are scarce, the atmosphere moody, the actors' looks and gestures meaningful. The characters look at each other wrapped in cinematic darkness, while you feel their pain that stems from what happened before.

"We shot this little heart-throbbing scene on-location in London and, as it wasn't as established as the sisters' homes, I had creative license to play with darkness, and create something more tenebrous," recalls Van Rei.

"This became one of my favourite scenes during the DI, because its energy and colours sat really nicely and naturally as to how it was shot and lit. I'm incredibly grateful to have had ace colourist, and wonderful human, Jet Omoshebi at Goldcrest by my side throughout the process of finding the balance between the look that was set and expected for the show, and my different personal taste and aesthetic. Her honest 'big sister' chats, guidance and encouragement made the grading suite a nurturing cocoon of bliss!"

Claffin's office provided Van Rei with another of her signature minimalist moments, this time with a poignant scene of one of the brothers' reading his father's suicide letter.







Images: Photos by Evelin Van Rei and Louise Gaffney.  
Bad Sisters image © Apple. All rights reserved.



"It wasn't a particularly inspiring or exciting location to shoot in, but it felt real and humble," she reminisces. "This scene was pretty much lit by a single, harder source coming through the window from outside, hitting the character almost uncomfortably. It wasn't softened or particularly shaped, its 'imperfection' and 'accidentalness' felt wonderfully suitable for where the character was in the story, and what he

**"I always seek to imprint my signature on the imagery I create"**

was about to discover."

The show was shot on ARRI Alexa Mini LFs, with at least two cameras working all the time at ISO1600 and 2:1 framing, equipped with Nicole Hirsch Whitakers's choice of Masterbuilt Prime Lenses (18mm to 135mm), Masterbuilt Softflare (18mm to 105mm), as well as Masterbuilt Zoom. Van Rei's lights, also 'inherited' from Whitaker, included a solid HMI kit (18Kw ARRIMAX, M90 9Kw, 2.5KW Fresnel, 800W K5600Joker Bug) as well as a variety of

Tungsten (2Kw, 1Kw, 650W, 300W, 2Kw Gem Ball) and LED (S360 SkyPanel, S60 SkyPanel, Cream-Source Vortex 8, 1x1 Aladdin, 1x1 Velvet, Astera Titan Tubes, Hudson Spider) sources.

Most of the series was shot in the Republic Of Ireland, about which Van Rei says, "We were based just outside of Dublin in the small seaside settlement of Malahide, where smaller locations like pubs were shot, but we also worked in Swords, Howth, Portmarnock, Ballycastle, Dundalk, Sandycove and Dublin. We also shot in Northern Ireland, like Greencastle or Glenarm. Most interiors were built at OMA Film Studios in Enfield."

Again, Van Rei felt at her best when she got to work with visualising what lies beneath the surface. Such as on a beach scene with one of the sisters, a gifted sharpshooter, practicing with a bow. You see, *Bad Sisters* is a show structured around the Garveys' various ideas that might just have something to do with finishing-off the prickly JP. They fail again and again, yet each attempt has consequences. The beach scene is a preparation for new try.

"I sought to create this feeling of us – the camera – suddenly dropping 'into' our characters, as if we'd transcend with them from a different place and time, and were now reconnected. Our brilliant key grip, Paul Kemp, came up with a solution of rigging a twin tube paddle mount to our hybrid dolly with some ropes and pulleys attached to a Ronin, and operated

by hand," explains Van Rei. "It was my favourite rig on the show."

Van Rei is proud of one more impressively dark attempt to kill JP. The sisters plan to stage a gas leak in the family cabin in which the jerk will be resting after a hike.

"I had never shot explosions before and blowing-up an entire cabin was an exciting prospect. It involved careful planning and blocking with SFX, VFX, stunts and most of the other departments. I was really looking forward to these sequences, as they didn't have to fit into a straightjacket and allowed for more freedom and input. Dearbhla loved to approach them as something separate and thrilleresque, which tied in better with my taste and cinematic interests, so it was a real treat!"

The cabin exterior was built in Black Park, near Pinewood Studios, and the interiors were built on-stage and pre-rigged by gaffer TC Thomas and his team, as per DP Whittaker's brief who was set to shoot these scenes initially.

"I put together new photographic references for the cabin scenes and discussed these with Dearbhla and TC. I wanted to take ownership of the scenes and make them mine," Van Rei exclaims. "For our exteriors, Paul Kemp and his team brought out a Hydroscope 50 on a Raptor Base with a Libra remote head, which was expertly operated by action guru Mark Moriarty, whilst Steadicam extraordinaire John







Ferguson was on dolly and track. During the explosion we had three Alexa LF's running to cover every angle, as it had to be a one-take wonder. We shot VFX plates prior on a drone with the DJI Inspire 2 with Zenmuse X7 lenses."

Overall, van Rei shot 44 days for *Bad Sisters*, 13 on Block 1 (episodes 1-3, mid-September 2021) and 31 at Block 2 (episodes 4-6, end of September to early November 2021). Whilst anticipating the August premiere, she went to Cannes to accept the coveted Angénieux Special Encouragement Award, endorsing her internationally as a talent to watch. The renowned French-Iranian cinematographer, Darius Khondji AFC ASC, received the prestigious Pierre Angénieux Tribute during the festival.

"I'm very grateful I was given the opportunity to shoot *Bad Sisters*, and I'm particularly appreciative for having had camera operators Jamie Hicks and John Ferguson, DIT Patrick King, and the leading ladies Anne-Marie Duff, Eva Birthistle, Eve Hewson,

Sarah Greene and Sharon Horgan by my side, who always had my back. And, foremost, my biggest backer, and now friend, Dearbhla Walsh, to whom I am forever indebted for her kindness and support.

"*Bad Sisters* provided me with a wealth of learning, experience and stamina I didn't know I had, or was capable of. As a little birdie said: 'You've gained a badge of honour.'"



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